

**Reflections by Travis Heath**

On AFTA Keynote 2019 Vikki Reynolds PhD RCC

Justice-Doing with each other: Doing Dignity and respect amidst the darkness of our work

“You need to say why I’m doing this as a white person.”

When Vikki uttered these words aloud just seconds after being introduced it seemed to unsettle the room. Might that mean these words were doing important work? Interestingly, the question was never answered sufficiently for my liking. That is not to say that I think Vikki shouldn’t have been speaking, as I believe she was, and is, eminently qualified to do so. However, she raised an important question that I think deserved to be answered, and I don’t know that it was. It also raised other questions such as: why weren’t there persons of color as a part of the keynote discussion? Perhaps we would have had important reflections to make in real time for those in attendance?

Fortunately, as I’ve come to expect from Vikki, I thought she managed the politics of representation well by citing many indigenous voices and people of color. I often joke with colleagues that if I have to listen to one more white dude rail on capitalism during a keynote at a conference as though he’s somehow transcended it right before he collects his fat check and heads home, I might have to consider an alternative career path. Maybe the question is more how we try and form a preferred relationship with capitalism rather than transcending it since the very structures of our conferences and practices are indelibly tied to it? But I digress.

As Vikki began speaking, the phrase “justice doing” tickled my ear. I much prefer this to the old standby of social justice. Where exactly is the justice in social justice these days? This phrase gets used with such frequency by so many groups that I fear that it has ceased to mean much at all. If everyone is doing social justice, is anyone really doing it? I have concerns about language that becomes stale. I have grave concerns about language that comes to symbolize automatic ally-ship. I fear buzz phrases like social justice and multicultural counseling are doing exactly that. What possibilities might justice doing offer us that social justice does not, or is not anymore?

As Vikki’s talk continued I was intrigued by how she defined genocide as something much more insidious than what you would find in the Oxford English Dictionary. I was moved by her discussion about the genocidal intentions of the dominant systems to “take the Indian out of the child.” Growing up as a child of mixed race adopted by two white parents I was hit particularly hard by these words. As Marcela Polanco says so beautifully, my body marks the very battle ground of the oppressed and the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer. I’ve learned my ancestors came from Brazil (presumably by way of Europe and Africa), but there would be no connection to this far away land during my upbringing. I was taught to speak ‘properly’ under the gaze of the colonial school system. This only further continued as I matriculated to my PhD program. I have developed an expertise in speaking and writing in colonized tongue. How much of my ancestors has been invisibilized or even pillaged out of me?

How culpable is the institution of psychotherapy for participating in such practices, often without even realizing it is doing so? What responsibilities do we as therapists have to facilitate more culturally democratic healing processes that can't be found in traditional ideas of multicultural counseling where people have the ability to speak on behalf of their own healing?

To continue to move toward the kind of solidarity that Vikki is inviting us into, might we have to consider a question first posed to me by my friend and colleague Navid Zamani. I would paraphrase this question as follows: when we practice within the formalized disciplines of psychiatry, psychology, marriage and family therapy, etc. are we all essentially rendered white men regardless of how we are located in the world given the structures of power that led to the formation of these fields? If I focus on the mind to the exclusion of the soul and disproportionately on biologic and physiologic explanations of distress, couldn't it be argued that my practice has become Europeanized and that I'm now a defacto white therapist? Might this mean that even when we invite persons of color into the discussion, if we are expected to speak within the already existing 'clinical' paradigms that we are rendered nothing more than tokens?

As so beautifully described by JB The First Lady, "If you don't Respect my Existence, expect my Resistance." How can we be a part of the resistance movements of the people who consult us if we won't openly resist the very parts of our fields that overtly, and sometimes unwittingly, stand in support of the very kinds of oppressions that the social justice movements and multicultural counseling claim to abhor?

I experienced Vikki's words as a call to action. We must have uncomfortable conversations. We must be open to having our work interrogated. We must be willing to live our lives according to the values of justice-doing rather than espousing it as though it is merely a philosophical concept for us to 'play' with in our work. We must be willing to get proximal because rarely can the work of justice be done within the cozy confines of our offices.